

## Implementing peer support in secondary schools: facing the challenges

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The implementation of a peer support programme in 13 secondary schools from a community with rising rates of high-risk behaviour is discussed. The programme was aimed at establishing support for learners with psychosocial problems in order to prevent and reduce high-risk behaviour related to HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, and various forms of crime. Peer supporters were identified, trained and supported to implement the programme in their schools with the assistance of a teacher and student facilitators. Peer supporters identified learners with problems, supported them or referred them to helping agencies. They also started awareness and information activities to prevent and reduce high-risk behaviour. Through the evaluation of the implementation process, crucial challenges were identified that need to be addressed for the programme to function optimally and to enhance its sustainability. The lessons learnt from this research can be applied to other schools in the implementation of similar programmes.

### Introduction

A peer support programme was established in secondary schools in a previously disadvantaged urban community in Tshwane where psychosocial problems such as violence and crime, substance abuse and HIV/AIDS are reaching alarming proportions (Department of Education, 1997; Department of Health, 2003; Parry, 1998; Visser, Schoeman & Perold, 2004; Visser, 2003; Weir-Smith, 2002). The extent of psychosocial problems among young people in the area can possibly be related to poverty among a large proportion of the population, a lack of mental health services and the socio-political climate of change in the country. An implication of a community in transition is that young people often grow up in a world without clear guidelines, because traditional structures and meanings are no longer appropriate in the present context and new structures and meanings are not in place yet (Hickson & Kriegler, 1991; Hickson & Mokhobo, 1992). These conditions often contribute to the development of high-risk behaviour, psychosocial problems and a lack of guidance for young people.

In a situation analysis done before the intervention, a questionnaire was used to obtain data about high-risk behaviour from a stratified sample of 873 secondary school learners (13–19 years). These learners were from Tshwane and represented the population composition in the area. The following forms of high-risk behaviour were identified:

- 27% of the learners reported having used alcohol over the past 30 days, whilst 11% admitted to binge drinking (defined as having more than five drinks on one occasion).
- 36% reported that they were sexually experienced; 17% were parents already; 8% reported having experienced sex against their will; 21% reported having had multiple sexual partners and 31% said that they had not used a condom during their last sexual encounter and were therefore at risk for HIV/AIDS.
- 5% of learners reported that they had been sexually abused and 15% that they had been physically abused by family members; 10% indicated that they would like to run away from home for good, and 38% reported substance abuse by their parents. These statistics point to a high level of family problems.
- 11% of learners reported feeling depressed most of the time, 10% reported suicidal tendencies and 12% reported experiencing uncontrolled aggression. These negative emotions may contribute to different forms of high-risk behaviour (Visser, 2001).

The disadvantaged people from the community under review had limited access to mental health resources, since they simply could not afford psychological services. During the restructuring of educational resources, the psychological services that had previously existed in the education system were also closed down. As an alternative, a policy was adopted to train teachers as providers of primary mental health and to teach them to identify learners with problems, counsel them or refer them to appropriate services (Department of Education, 1997; Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002). It was, however, found that learners did not trust these teachers enough to talk to them about their personal problems, as the teachers occupied an authoritarian position

(Visser, 2001). Likewise, many of the teachers felt that they were not properly equipped to deal with the emotional problems of the learners. As teachers, they already carried a heavy burden in the schools and experienced high levels of stress (Davidoff, 1997; Jeevanantham, 1999; Mabeba & Prinsloo, 2000; Steyn, 1999; Steyn & Van Wyk, 1999; Vorster & Sutcliffe, 2000). They simply did not see counselling as part of their job description (Visser *et al.*, 2004).

There was also a lack of appropriate services to which to refer learners from disadvantaged communities. In surveys done in the area, learners indicated that they did not have adequate support systems. They also reported that they did not have an adult (27%) or a friend (23%) to talk to when they experienced personal problems (Visser, 2001; 2003). High-risk behaviour among young people, such as substance abuse, violence and crime, and high-risk sexual behaviour, is often related to the experience of psychosocial problems (Flisher, Ziervogel, Chalton, Leger & Robertson, 1996; Shiel, 1999) and a lack of support and guidance (Visser, 2003).

In an attempt to address some of the problems experienced by the school-going young people, a peer support system was implemented in secondary schools in Tshwane. Students from the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria collaborated with a coordinator from the Gauteng Department of Education to implement the project in schools. The guidelines for peer support developed by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (2001) and the Gauteng Education Department (in progress) were followed. In the process of implementation of the peer support programme, crucial challenges in the effective implementation of the programme were identified. The current research can assist other schools to face the challenges that arise when similar programmes are implemented.

The concept of 'peer support' was used to describe the main function of the programme in schools. It was decided to use this concept instead of others like 'peer counselling' or 'peer helper' (often used interchangeably) to stress that peers could give support but cannot provide formal counselling or help solve the emotional problems of their fellow learners.

### Peer support as psychological intervention

The project was built on the extensive literature regarding the value of social support and non-professional help in promoting mental health in the community (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002; Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001; Hobfall & Vaux, 1993; Humphreys, Finney & Moos, 1994; Rhodes, Ebert & Fischer, 1992). Social support can be defined as an exchange of resources between individuals that is perceived by both parties to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient (Shumaker & Brownwell, 1984). Non-professional help builds on social support in more structured helping relationships (Durlak, 1979). Through promoting social support and non-professional help, community resources and caring can be extended in an exponential way and the social climate in the community can be changed to create a caring community. Thus the mental health of individuals is enhanced and a sense of community is promoted (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Levine &

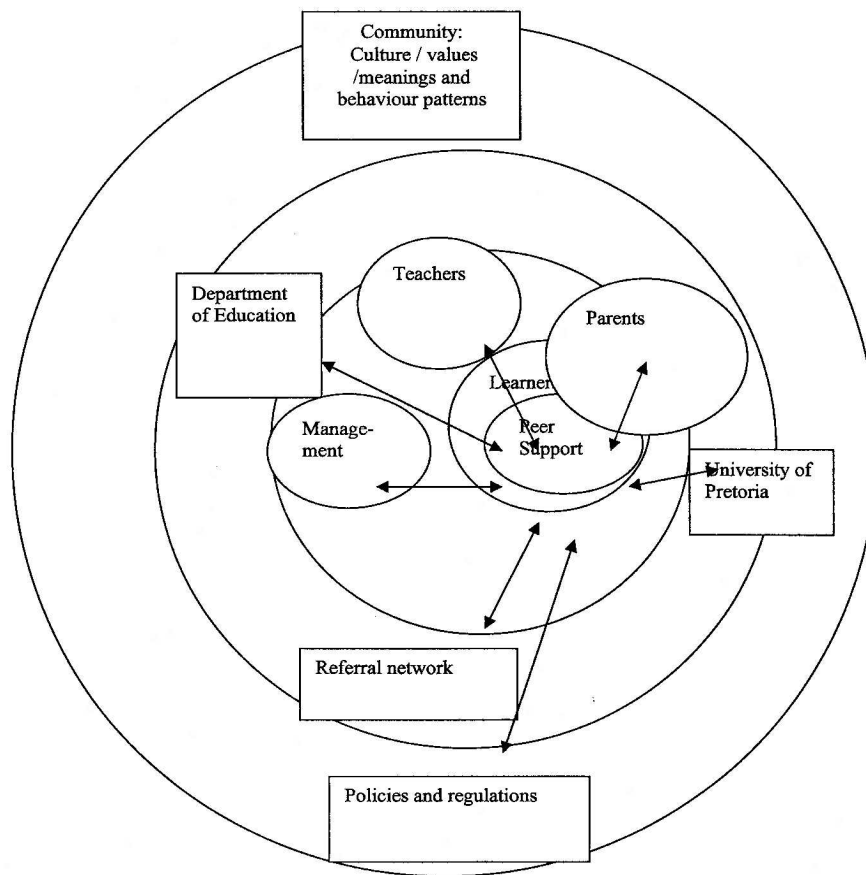


Figure 1 Conceptualisation of the peer support programme in schools

Perkins, 1997). Research shows that social support from others provides a buffer that moderates the effects of psychosocial stressors (Dalton *et al.*, 2001).

Supportive peer relationships can promote the sharing of knowledge and experiences, provide role models and enhance healthy coping skills because the young people are all in the same situation. A peer support system can have a particularly positive impact in a group of young people where they are sources of reference for one another (Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1998). Adolescents identify more easily with their peers and are far more likely to openly discuss sexual practices, drug-taking, and emotional reactions with their peers than with adults who are considered to be figures of authority. They are also more likely to change their own behaviour if they perceive liked and trusted peers to be changing theirs (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002; Dube & Wilson, 1999; Finger, Lapetina & Pribila, 2002; Horizons, 1999; Latham, 1997; Louw *et al.*, 1998; Kaya & Mabetoa, 1997; Speizer, Heller & Brieger, 2000; Tanaka & Reid, 1997; Van Dyk, 2001). Through peer support, information about HIV/AIDS and healthy lifestyles can be circulated in a language understandable to young people. Healthy lifestyles can also be modelled, and a forum for the discussion of issues can be established. Ideally, this can create a context for the emergence of new and healthier behavioural patterns through the renegotiation of social identities in the peer group — assuming that sexuality and behavioural patterns are shaped by peer group norms (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002).

Peer support can serve as a tool for addressing emotional and behavioural problems before they become severe. In this way a culture can be created in which young people feel free to ask for help if they need it and a more caring climate can be established in the schools (Tanaka & Reid, 1997). Through the support of their peers, young

people can be empowered to take ownership of their own well-being and initiate the solving of some of the problems they experience. This can increase their sense of self-efficacy and is in direct contrast with counselling experts trying to convince individuals to change their behaviour based on someone else's frame of reference.

### Conceptualisation of peer support in schools

The immediate goal of the project was to establish a peer support system that could contribute to the creation of a caring community in schools that could provide guidance, support and behavioural models for learners. The expectation was that peer support could help learners to overcome certain psychosocial problems, thus preventing or reducing eventual high-risk behaviour and promoting healthy lifestyles and psychological well-being among school-going young people.

The peer support system in schools had to be implemented in the existing educational context. It was meant to be a sustainable programme, integrated into the routine functioning of the school. In terms of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory the peer support system can be conceptualised in terms of the micro-, exo-, and macro-levels of the educational system, with interaction between all levels of the system (Figure 1).

The school community is the micro-level system (inner concentric circle) that can be divided into various sub-systems, such as the teachers, school management, and the learners. These groups are in continuous interaction with one another. Through our project a new sub-system, the peer supporters, was introduced into the learners' sub-system. Their role was to provide new information, act as role models, support learners with problems and organise health promotion activities in schools. The peer supporters were seen as the internal change agents (Scheirer, 1990) who could facilitate change from within the

learner sub-system (Capra, 1997; Dell, 1985).

As external change agents (Scheirer, 1990), the student facilitators from the University and the co-ordinator of the Department of Education formed part of the exo-system that played an important role in establishing the peer support sub-system. They provided training and support to establish communication between the peer supporters and the other sub-systems in the school. Other role-players on the exo-level were the helping organisations such as health and mental health practitioners and non-governmental organisations in the community that formed a support system and referral network to provide help for learners who experienced problems.

On the macro-level, policies and organisational structures, as well as the culture, values and meanings, that can play a role in belief systems and behaviour patterns, impacted on the peer support system. For example, if it is part of the culture in a community not to talk about personal problems, then the young people may not like to discuss their personal problems with the peer supporters. Organisational structures in the community also impact on the support provided by health and mental health practitioners.

This conceptualisation of the peer support system in schools highlights the relevance of interaction between the different sub-systems within the school community and external resources. To establish an effective peer support system as psychological intervention in a school community would therefore be a complex process that requires simultaneous changes in various domains and at various levels of the educational system and in the community (Sarason, 1996). Bateson (1979) defined various levels of processes and feedback in complex systems and showed how higher-order processes provide feedback about and impact on lower-order processes. For example, processes on the school organisation level impact on sub-systems in the school, such as the interaction between teachers and learners.

According to Fullan (1991; 1992) another key concept in the implementation of change in a school context is the development of shared meanings with regard to the intended change. Although every individual has to attach meaning, the process of establishing shared meanings between various role-players through communication is essential in the process of initiating change.

### Method of programme implementation

The peer support system was implemented in 13 secondary schools in Tshwane over the past two years as part of a collaborative relationship between the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria and a coordinator of the Department of Education. The idea of involving learners in a helping relationship with their peers was born during discussion of the lack of psychological services in schools. Guidance teachers in schools in the area, who are responsible for helping learners with problems, were consulted and they agreed to the principle of peer support.

The peer support system in schools was implemented through a process of action research (McNiff, 1988; Walker, 1997) that allowed for continuous evaluation and adjustment in the implementation of the programme. The systems (Capra, 1997; Hanson, 1995) and social construction (Fullan, 1991; Shimp, 2001) theories were used as theoretical frameworks in the planning of the intervention and in the interpretation of feedback obtained by means of the evaluation processes.

Various processes in the implementation of the programme will be discussed.

### Selection of peer supporters

The Department of Education selected thirteen schools to represent the population composition in the area. Schools that were known for having many learners who experience psychosocial problems were selected.

In each participating school, ten peer supporters were selected during the first year of implementation. During the second year an additional five to ten supporters were trained for each school, resulting in a group of 170 peer supporters after the second year of imple-

mentation. In the first year, teachers selected peer supporters from learners who volunteered. The following criteria were used in the selection of peer supporters:

- Learners had to be in Grades 9 to 11 (ages 14–18 years), to ensure that they could act as peer supporters for more than one year before leaving school.
- Learners had to display characteristics such as openness, approachability and good interpersonal relationships.

In the second year of implementation learners in the schools voted for the candidates they wanted as peer supporters. This was done to involve the learners in the school in the selection of peer supporters and to raise their awareness of this helping system.

### Training of peer supporters

Training is the process of developing skills to implement an intervention and to form shared meanings between consultants and participants (Fullan, 1992; Louis & Miles, 1990). The peer support programme was initiated with the training of peer supporters during a 24-hour holiday workshop that was facilitated by the graduate students. Training was done in small groups involving the group of peer supporters from each school and focused on the following content:

- Group cohesion, team building and personal growth
- An understanding of the experiences of and problems among their peers
- Communication skills such as listening and empathy
- Problem-solving skills
- Information about HIV/AIDS and substance abuse as psychosocial issues in the schools
- Organisational skills to organise group activities aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles and raising awareness of the peer support system in schools

After the holiday workshop the training continued in the form of a one hour session per week for 10 weeks at each of the different schools, facilitated by the graduate students. The focus of these sessions was on building communication skills and helping the peer supporters to implement the helping system and overcome the problems encountered during the implementation process. The training sessions constituted the core of the project since the peer supporters could discuss and give meaning to their roles in the school; they could voice their opinions and discuss the challenges they faced.

### Involvement of other role-players in the school

Whole-hearted participation and commitment of various role-players in the school is important for the effective implementation and sustainability of the programme. Although commitment is an evolving concept that grows with the successful implementation of a programme (Fullan, 1992), the focus in the initiation of the programme was on encouraging role players in the school community to take ownership of the programme:

- School principals were informed about the rationale of the programme and about what was expected in each school. They were also asked to state what the school would require in order to implement the project.
- One teacher in every school was invited to a workshop to discuss the goals of the project, the roles of peer supporters and the role of teachers in supporting these peer supporters. In the second year of implementation more teachers were approached to become involved in the implementation of the project, so as to support one another.
- All the teachers in the participating schools were involved in a planning session to discuss the possible role of the peer supporters and how they could support them.

### Implementation in the schools

Within this context, implementation involved the action taken to initiate change in the school. After attending the holiday workshop, peer supporters returned to their schools to implement the programme.

During the implementation stage a recursive relationship was formed between the programme content and the context of implementation where new meanings were to be created. In a cyclical manner this resulted in changes in both the programme and the context (Capra, 1997; Fullan, 1991). The implementation of an intervention can therefore not be planned rigidly, since processes, relationships and meanings develop as change takes place (Fullan, 1991). The peer supporters were therefore faced with many challenges, as will be discussed below.

#### *The role of the peer supporters*

In each school the peer supporters could give their own meaning to their roles to encourage ownership of the project. The role most peer supporters decided on involved the following:

- Identifying and supporting learners who have experienced psychosocial problems and referring them to appropriate helping facilities.
- Facilitating change in peer group norms from within the peer group by creating a context for awareness and communication among peers about high-risk behaviour.
- Mobilising the involvement and participation of young people and other stakeholders in addressing the problems experienced by young people in schools.

#### *Creating awareness of the peer supporters*

The peer supporters introduced themselves to the school at assembly. At some of the schools they also performed plays, made posters, painted graffiti walls, organised health awareness days and distributed newsletters. This was done to market their services and to construct a context in the organisation of the school for them to help others.

#### *Ongoing support*

The implementation process can be seen as negotiation and re-negotiation and as a continuous dealing with problems in implementation. Huberman and Miles (1984:273) stress the importance of ongoing support in implementing an intervention by stating: "Large-scale change-bearing innovations lived or died by the amount and quality of assistance that their users received once the change process was under way". The psychology students as facilitators of the implementation process provided support, which involved developing the skills of participants, providing resources, motivating them and encouraging problem solving to overcome the obstacles they faced. As support was needed throughout the various day-to-day experiences of peer supporters, support was built into the various levels of the implementation process:

- All training sessions were conducted in a group and involved all the peer supporters in a school so as to enhance group cohesion and support. The participants were encouraged to trust and support one another in the implementation of the project.
- The follow-up training sessions in the schools were also used to provide support to peer supporters who experienced personal problems and difficulty in dealing with the problems of their peers. Through the relationship with the students as facilitators, the peer supporters gained self-knowledge and confidence in their own interpersonal skills.
- The role of the teachers was to support the peer supporters and to form a communication channel between peer supporters and the school management.
- Some financial support was provided for the peer supporters to create awareness of their services and to organise awareness activities that would involve their peers.
- A management committee consisting of one peer supporter and teacher from each school was formed to meet once a month with the co-ordinators of the Department of Education and the University to discuss progress in the implementation of the programme.
- Also built into the project was support for the students as facilitators of the programme implementation. These facilitators had weekly feedback sessions with the project leader to discuss the

implementation process and problems that they were dealing with. During the weekly sessions they could share experiences and discuss guidelines on how to handle difficult situations.

#### **Evaluation of the programme implementation**

An intervention may have many possible implications in a community due to the equifinal or multifinal processes that occur (Capra, 1997). Every person or every community reacts according to its own internal processes and the meanings it attaches to the intervention (Fullan, 1991). The outcome of a process of change can therefore not be predicted and needs to be closely monitored to provide feedback that may be used in the further planning of the intervention.

Programme evaluation involves the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics and outcome of programmes to make judgements about the programme, improve its effectiveness and inform discussions about future programming (Patton, 1997). While outcome evaluation focuses on the impact of an intervention, process evaluation focuses on the "internal dynamics and actual operations of a programme in an attempt to understand its strengths and weaknesses" (Patton, 1997:206). Process evaluation contributes to the understanding of the complex environment in which the intervention takes place, as well as the impact of the intervention on social processes in the context (Goodman, 2000; Patton, 1997). The focus in evaluating the implementation of the peer support intervention will therefore be on understanding the specific challenges and on how the project was implemented and integrated into the complex school system — a process evaluation.

Various ways of monitoring the implementation of the programme were used:

- The facilitators provided weekly reports on the training sessions and discussion of activities and problems experienced in implementing peer support in schools.
- Focus group discussions were held twice a year, where all the peer supporters (n=170) discussed the activities implemented in their schools, their experiences, achievements, the challenges they encountered and possible ways of improving the peer support system. This was also done to motivate peer supporters by exchanging ideas between schools.
- Focus group discussions were held with the responsible teachers (n=13) about the activities of the peer supporters and the challenges faced in implementing the project.
- Peer supporters were provided with diaries and requested to record the number of learners who had personal discussions with them, as well as the kind of problems that were discussed. This was done to monitor how many learners actually used the support system. (This way of monitoring did not work effectively, because the peer supporters used it for their personal records and were not prepared to share information from their diaries. The data were subsequently obtained from the learners themselves.)
- A sample of learners from seven of the participating schools (one randomly chosen class of about 30 learners per grade group in each school, n=698) completed a questionnaire to assess their awareness, use and opinion of the peer support system in their school. The sample of learners consisted of 43% males and 57% females. Altogether 43% were in the age group 13 to 15 years, 49% in the age group 16 to 18 years, and 6% were 19 to 20 years old. The sample of learners was representative of the race and language groups in the area: 24% Afrikaans-speaking white and coloured learners, 20% Zulu speakers, 14% Sepedi speakers, 13% Setswana speakers, and 13% English-speaking Indian learners.

The qualitative data from the various sources were analysed and a few themes were identified (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These data could be used to understand the process of implementation and "fine-tuning" of the programme to the needs of the different role players in each school.

## Results

The themes identified from the facilitators' reports and focus group discussions with peer supporters and teachers focused mainly on the initiation of change in schools, the challenges in forming relationships on different levels of the school system and the activities of peer supporters in the schools.

### Initiating peer support in the schools

After initial training at the holiday workshop, the peer supporters went back to their schools to implement the peer support system through making themselves known in the school, building relationships with their peers, and organising health promotion activities. The peer supporters left the holiday workshop with high aspirations. Back at school they had to translate their aspirations into practice. The challenges they faced in the process of initiating change were the following:

#### *Re-organising as a team*

They had to organise themselves as a team in relation to the needs in the school. In some schools they nominated more learners to become peer supporters. In other schools peer supporters who were not committed, dropped out. There was greater commitment among peer supporters in schools where peer supporters were assigned specific roles and responsibilities.

#### *Giving meaning to the role of peer supporter*

In each school the peer supporters and their teachers had to give meaning to the role of peer supporter. Teachers and peer supporters held different perspectives of what they could do and needed to construct shared meanings. Some teachers felt the peer supporters should only provide information, identify learners with problems, and then inform the teachers. However, the peer supporters shared personal and very intimate issues in their informal contact with their peers. They were scared that their peers would not trust them any more if they were to inform the teachers about problems the learners experienced, since the learners did not have a trusting relationship with the teachers. The agreed upon peer supporter role therefore depended on the needs in the school, the commitment and interaction among the group of peer supporters, the peer supporter–teacher relationship, the peer supporter–student facilitator relationship and the process of implementation. Initially, the process of developing a shared idea of the role of peer supporter contributed to some confusion that needed to be sorted out before the project could be implemented.

#### *Introduction to the schools*

The peer supporters had to market their services at schools. This was done through introducing themselves at assembly or organising events. In some of the schools it took a long time before they got permission from the school management to formally introduce themselves, which created frustration among the peer supporters and resulted in a slow start.

### Building relationships in the school

The most important challenge of the project was to establish relationships between the peer supporters and the various sub-systems in the schools — peers, teachers and helping organisations — and to establish a sustainable structure in the school system.

#### *Building relationships with peers*

Some of the challenges the peer supporters experienced in building relationships with their peers were the following:

- Building trusting relationships: Initially learners tried to make fun of the peer supporters and tested their acceptance with fake problems. After the novelty of introducing the system was over, learners showed some acceptance of the project.
- Confidentiality: To develop a trusting relationship, confidentiality was needed. However, peer supporters were not equipped to deal with serious psychological problems and had to get some

assistance from a trusted adult or refer their peers to appropriate helping facilities. This could easily compromise the confidentiality of the relationship and the peer supporters consequently needed training in discussing referrals with their peers.

- A culture of not talking about personal problems: In some of the schools, especially among white Afrikaans-speaking learners and Indian learners it was found that sharing personal information was not part of the culture in the schools. To optimise the benefits of the peer support programme, this culture of silence had to be challenged.
- Conflicting relationships: Some peer supporters experienced conflict in handling relationships with their peers. On the one hand they were friends, while on the other they were helpers. They also needed support in managing relationships that involved hostility and aggression, and being idealised by their peers.
- Heavy burdens: Peer supporters sometimes had to shoulder burdens that they could not carry. At times they experienced excessive responsibility in coping with their own development problems and at the same time helping their peers cope with serious issues such as rape and trauma. Latham (1997:78) wrote in this regard: "Even the most mature and responsible high school peer counselor is still a teenager, facing the same formidable challenges as his or her peers." Therefore, these learners needed extensive training and support to deal with being a peer supporter.

#### *Building relationships with teachers*

In terms of the peer supporter–teacher relationships there were also barriers in implementing the project. Six of the teachers responsible for the programme in their schools were enthusiastic and actively supported it. In these schools the peer supporters could implement their ideas with support from the school management. Although various interventions were made to involve all the teachers responsible for the project (and these teachers actually agreed to the importance of the project), the peer supporters in the other seven schools did not experience adequate support from their teachers. These teachers did not feel comfortable dealing with learners' emotional problems. Without the support of the teachers the peer supporters did not have enough negotiating power in the schools to facilitate change. This created much frustration among the peer supporters who were enthusiastically taking part. As a result, during the second year of implementation an increased emphasis was placed on encouraging teachers' participation and involvement.

#### *Building relationships with referral organisations*

The peer supporters identified learners with serious problems but did not have a comprehensive referral system to which to refer these learners, except via the psychology students of the University. There was a serious lack of mental health resources in these communities.

#### *Establishing a sustainable structure*

The goal of the project was to establish a sustainable structure in schools as part of the routine functioning of the school. After two years of implementation the peer support system was formalised as a sub-committee of the student representative body in two schools and in another school they were assistants to the Guidance teacher. In some schools, however, they still lacked the acceptance and support of the school management and the teachers.

### Activities of the peer supporters in schools

Another theme identified from the focus group discussions with peer supporters and the facilitators' reports were the activities of peer supporters. After an initial difficult period of initiating the project in schools, the peer supporters started to take initiative and supported their peers in innovative ways.

#### *Support for personal problems*

In seven of the schools the peer supporters started an office with a

schedule of peer supporters available, where the learners could reach them to talk to them about personal problems. They defined their role as supporters or "befrienders". The teachers referred some learners to peer supporters, and the peer supporters asked for the assistance of the teachers and the facilitators. In the other schools, consultation was done in a more informal way on the school grounds. From the focus group discussions it was concluded that there was some acceptance of the peer support system in most of the schools, since learners started to share personal experiences with them. The most important problems discussed were addictions such as smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, sexually oriented problems such as rape, pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and relationship problems, gambling, and peer pressure.

#### *Information and awareness activities*

Another role of the peer supporters was to initiate activities to enhance learners' knowledge and awareness of psychosocial problems such as HIV/AIDS and drug abuse. Activities that they undertook included the following:

- Inviting guest speakers about topical issues (9 schools)
- Organising AIDS and drug awareness days with speakers, drama, song and dance (6 schools)
- Presenting dramas with health messages in various classes (3 schools)
- Initiating the establishment of a feeding scheme for needy children (3 schools)
- Organising safety, child protection and crime prevention programmes (3 schools)
- Developing posters and newsletters with information (2 schools)
- Painting a graffiti wall with preventive messages (1 school)
- Presenting dramas for other community members and helping children with HIV in orphanages (3 schools)

In three of the schools no formal activities were organised.

#### *Mobilising resources*

In two of the schools the peer supporters functioned as communication channels between the learners, teachers, and helping agencies. As activists they tried to make teachers aware of the problems learners experienced and asked for their commitment to address these problems. They also involved helping agencies such as the police, health clinics, and social workers to address problems in their schools.

The peer supporters therefore played a valuable role as resources in the schools to support learners with psychosocial problems and to provide information and activities focusing on healthy lifestyles.

#### **Learners' opinions of the peer support system**

Because the diaries of the peer supporters could not be used to monitor the use of the peer support system, a sample of 698 learners from seven of the participating schools was asked to complete a questionnaire. Data from the questionnaires were used to determine how many learners as potential users of the peer support system knew about and used the peer support system and what their opinion about the peer support system was.

In this sample 67% of the respondents reported that they knew about the peer supporters in their school. This percentage varied between 24% and 79%, depending on the visibility of the peer supporters and the climate in each school. Altogether 20% of learners reported that they had consulted these peer supporters: 12% in the Indian school where talking about personal problems was not likely and 27% in schools that were more open to discussing such issues.

Of the learners who gave an opinion ( $n=477$ ), 57% evaluated the peer support service as positive, useful and serving a need in their schools. The negative evaluations (43%) also gave some valuable insight into learners' perspectives of the functioning of the programme in their schools, for example:

- The programme was not marketed properly in the school
- The teachers did not support it
- There were too few peer supporters

- The peer supporters should be more available
- The peer supporters were too young
- The peer supporters could not be trusted

The above feedback may be interpreted as indicating that many of the learners saw the value of the peer support system, but that problems remained in the implementation of the system, which could be improved on in the following year.

#### **Discussion**

Although the concept of peer support may be a viable strategy to provide information and support to secondary school learners (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002; Horizons, 1999; Speizer, Heller & Brieger, 2000), the implementation of the programme plays a very important role in the extent of its effectiveness in schools. In this regard Sarason (1996: 78) wrote:

The way in which the change process is conceptualised is far more fateful for success or failure than the content one seeks to implement. You can have the most creative, compellingly valid, productive idea in the world, but whether it can become embedded and sustained in a socially complex setting will be primarily a function of how you conceptualise the implementation-change process.

The aim of implementing the peer support system was to develop a sustainable structure that could enhance a caring climate in schools and impact on the behavioural patterns of learners. In order to integrate the programme into the school's routine functioning, it was necessary to build relationships between the peer supporters and the different role-players, to focus on the needs of the learners, and to gain acceptance from the school management as a helping system. Feedback to the effect that the learners benefited from peer support would also contribute to the sustainability of the programme (Akerlund, 2000; Pentz, 2000). In two of the schools peer support was formalised as part of the school structure after two years of implementation. In the other schools the programme was still in varying stages of acceptance.

From the research it can be concluded that the process of implementing a peer support programme, in secondary schools and involving numerous groups of role players, is quite complex. Each person has to become aware of his/her own role, give personal meaning to it, interact with others to develop a shared meaning, and give life to that role in a complex system of interaction. This is expected of the teachers, peer supporters, and the learners, as well as from the student facilitators. It is therefore a difficult task to facilitate clear communication between the various role-players for it to function as an interdependent whole. Setting up multiple feedback loops between the role-players involved, to facilitate information flow and support was essential to keep the process of implementation on track and to adapt the programme to the context. Weekly sessions between the peer supporters and student facilitators and between the student facilitators and project leaders were valuable in this regard.

Several challenges were identified during the first two years of implementation. Crucial aspects in the implementation and sustainability of the peer support programme that still need attention are the following:

- Peer supporters need ongoing support to motivate them and to help them to deal with personal issues and with the problems that their peers discuss with them. They need assistance to build relationships with peers, to develop their own helping skills and to gain acceptance for the peer support system in the school community. During the first two years of implementation the student facilitators could provide this support, but teachers should take over this function to contribute to the programme's sustainability.
- Although teachers were consulted in the development of the role of peer supporters and in the implementation of the peer support system, the idea of peer support had not originated from the teachers. Some teachers simply did not regard care for the emotional well-being of learners as part of their duty as teachers. Due to a long history of oppression and struggle, teachers also lacked

the necessary motivation and were not easily motivated to participate in new projects that would expect more effort from them (Booyse & Swanepoel, 1999; Davidoff, 1997; Perold, 2000; Steyn & Van Wyk, 1999). Much more attention should therefore be focused on the involvement of teachers who are willing to assist the peer supporters. Johnson, Vergnani and Chopra (2002) emphasised the importance of support and participation by school principals and teachers and the existence of a sound school-based policy supporting interventions. Support from the teachers and the school management is essential in creating a context in which the peer supporters may function successfully.

- The peer supporters need community resources for the referral of learners with serious problems. Without a back-up referral system the peer supporters can become overburdened, which implies that they cannot provide able assistance to their peers. One of the objectives of the project was to build a referral system that consists of volunteers, *pro-bono* professionals, and community organisations who would all be available to help school learners that are struggling with problems.
- Peer supporters need a positive school environment that is conducive to the healthy behaviour patterns and psychological well-being that they try to promote. The complexities of an educational system, which finds itself in a process of restructuring and change, do not contribute to a healthy system. Too many changes are taking place within the school system (Booyse & Swanepoel, 1999; Jeevanantham, 1999; Steyn, 1998; Steyn, 1999) and too few resources are channelled towards the well-being of learners. The main focus in the current educational system is on improving the academic standard in schools and very limited resources are provided to enhance the emotional well-being of learners. Although the educational system faces serious problems and the emotional well-being of its learners is not a focus area, the implementers of the programme agreed that they could not wait for the system to use its self-regulative strategies (Capra, 1997) while many learners were experiencing serious emotional and behavioural problems that could have a significant impact on the rest of their lives. An intervention such as this was necessary to start a healing process from within the school as a bottom-up process. Implementing an intervention that is not supported by the present educational climate means that it will take more effort, support, resources, and time, as well as greater participation from all the different role-players, as the educational climate — a higher-order process (Bateson, 1979) — needs to change first to sustain the intervention (see Figure 1).

The project as it functioned during the first two years was mainly driven by the enthusiasm and energy of the peer supporters, a few committed teachers, and a group of student facilitators. The strengths of the programme were the informal relationships, shared contexts, culture, age, and experiences with peers which resulted in learners sharing personal experiences. The activities they organised as part of awareness campaigns not only facilitated communication and involvement of learners, but also enhanced their empowerment with regard to community issues that impacted on their lives. The peer support system indeed has the potential to reach its goal of making resources available to young people. It can help to change the climate in the school community to a more caring one and promote a healthy lifestyle among young people. Because peer supporters come from the same age and cultural groups as the learners, they can generate action from within the peer group to facilitate change with regard to high-risk behaviour patterns (Capra, 1997; Dell, 1985).

The peer support programme created a sense of hope in the schools, despite the difficult circumstances many of the learners had to face in their communities. This may be a small start in a small number of schools, but the impact of the programme may well filter through to many levels of the community.

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